Ancient Greek Medicine

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An Introduction to the Time:

Ancient Greece is called “the Birth place of Western Civilization”. The history of Greece can be traced back to Stone Age hunters. Later farmers and the civilization of The Minoan and Mycenaean Kings came.  After this came a period of wars and invasions which were known as the Dark Ages. In about 1100 B.C, people called the Dorians invaded from the north down to the west. From the period from 500-336 B.C Greece was divided into small city states. The four main city states were Athens, Sparta, Olympia and Corinith. The city states would sometimes fight but would also join together to fight against a bigger enemy such as the Persian Empire.  Only a very powerful ruler could control all Greece, and one man did in 300 B.C. He was Alexander the Great. Alexander led his powerful Army to conquer not only Greece but expanded his empire so it reaches as far as India and Afghanistan.   
The Ancient Greeks lived in mainland Greece and the Greek islands, but also in what is now Turkey, and in colonies scattered around the Mediterranean Sea coast. There were Greeks in Italy, Sicily, North Africa and as far as France, sailing the sea to trade and find new land.  
The Romans copied many ideas originally formatted by Greeks. For example the Romans copied many Greek gods and Greek art.

Beliefs on How the Body Worked

The Theory of the Four Humours

The ancient Greeks held a belief in the theory of the four humours, this was the theory that everything on earth was made up of 4 basic elements earth, water, fire and air. Each element had certain characteristics. Earth is cold and dry, air is hot and wet, water is cold and wet, and fire is hot and dry. They believed that the humours emanate from different organs, forming a subtle network around the body. Foods and herbs were also classified to this system and used accordingly. The typical diagnosis of a patient would include taking the “balance” of the four humours heavily into account. They believed maladies occurred when the humours were thrown off balance.

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| Humour | Body substance | Produced by | Element | Qualities | Body type | Personality |
| sanguine | blood | liver | air | Hot and moist | Red-cheeked, corpulent | Amorous, happy, generous, optimistic, irresponsible |
| Choleric | Yellow bile | spleen | fire | Hot and dry | Red haired, thin | Violent, vengeful, short tempered, ambitious |
| Phelmatic | Phlegm | lungs | water | Cold and moist | Corpulent | Sluggish ,pallid, cowardly |
| Meloncholic | Black bile | Gall bladder | earth | Cold and dry | Sallow, thin | Introspective, sentimental gluttonous |

They believed that each “humour” gave off vapors which ascended to the brain, and that an individual’s characteristics (physical, mental, moral) were explained by his or her “temperament” or the state of that persons humours.  The perfect temperament was thought to have been when no one humour dominated the rest. Knowledge of humours dominated ancient Greek medicine. Doctors of that time didn’t believe in interfering too invasively with the body. Rather, they believed their role as doctors was to “help nature along”. The furthest they would go under typical circumstances was too give the patient laxatives to “clean out” the system or a practice called, bloodletting, a process in which the doctor would cut the patient to drain blood operating under the assumption that this would “balance out” the humours. They believed heavily in the medicine of prevention. As well as elements, the 4 humours are also related to four temperaments, they are:

Sanguine

The sanguine temperament personality is fairly extroverted. People of a sanguine temperament tend to enjoy social gatherings, making friends and tend to be boisterous. They are usually creative and often daydream. Sanguine can also mean very sensitive, compassionate and thoughtful. Sanguine personalities struggle with following tasks all the way through, are chronically late and tend to be forgetful and sometimes sarcastic. Often, when pursuing a new hobby, interest is lost quickly when it ceases to be engaging or fun. They are very much “people people”.

 Choleric

A person who is choleric is a doer. They have a lot of ambition, energy and passion, and try to instill it in others. They can dominate people of other temperaments, especially “phlegmatic” types; many great charismatic military and political figures were thought to have been choleric. They like to be leaders and in charge of everything.

Melancholic

This is a thoughtful person with a melancholic disposition. Often considerate and worried when they could not be on time for things. Melancholics can be highly creative in activities such as poetry and art. And can become occupied and upset with the tragedy and cruelty in the world. A melancholic is also often a perfectionist. They are often self-reliant and independent, though sometimes they can get too caught up in themselves and forget to think of others.

Phlegmatic

Phlegmatics tend to be self-content and kind. They can be very accepting and affectionate. They may be very receptive and shy and often prefer stability to uncertainty and change. They are very consistent, relaxed, rational, curious, and observant, making them good administrators and diplomats.

The seasons were also regarded and taken into account when making a diagnosis, as each season was also linked with a liquid of the body. For example, for the Greeks, it would make sense if someone got a runny nose during the winter, as it was considered to be the “wet and cold” season, an excess build up of phlegm would also make sense and the patient would be diagnosed accordingly.

The use of the four humours as a diagnostic tool would result in doctors looking for symptoms. This would be the first time that clinical observation of a patient was recorded in Greece.

Ancient Greek Surgery

Ancient Greece was divided at that time into several independent city states, which were frequently at war, thus several Greek doctors became experts at practical first aid. They learned about setting broken and dislocated bones (they could cure a slipped disc by standing on patient’s back). Though they are known to have dissected corpses and examined the internal workings of human bodies, historians question whether they preformed internal surgical operations, as no real proof of that has been found.

The farthest they were known to have gone as far as surgery was concerned was the closing or sealing off of open wounds, usually war inflicted. They practiced surgery mostly on external parts of the body and rarely preformed anything else. For this they usually used forceps knives and probes. They didn’t believe in interfering too deeply with nature.

What Did People Suffer From at That Time  
In ancient Greek times they suffered from the common cold, ear infections, bronchitis, malaria, smallpox, measles, the plague and a broken leg. Doctors believed that rich people had more time to relax and therefore got better quicker where as poor people would take longer because the where always working.  
  
 The Public Health System in Greece:  
Greeks in ancient times actually knew that life style could affect your health, because they developed the Olympic, and they were very big on hygiene. They didn't really have a proper public health system like they didn't have sewers or running water, but they did have public baths. Many rich Greeks tried to follow a programme for health which included washing their teeth, going for walks, eating properly and keeping themselves at an even temperature. The reason rich people followed this programme was because rich people where have said to relax more. Hippocrates believed that poor people were to busy so they would be less healthy. This was linked to the four humours.

Methods of Diagnosis  
During Ancient Greek times there were not many scientific tools that the physicians could use to diagnose a patient. They did not have x-rays, CAT scans etc. Hippocrates, a famous doctor of that time, would observe his patient’s symptoms before saying what he thought his patient had. Doctors used all 5 senses when diagnosing a patient. For example, with sight they would observe the patients living style and how they went about daily life; to take the pulse and body temperature the doctor would use touch and with their sense of hearing they would listen to the patient’s stomach for rumbling noises.   
  
 Methods of Treatment  
Since belief played a big part in people’s lives during Ancient Greece, their treatment for illnesses also had religious aspects to it. People were starting to realize, though, that the illnesses were not caused by gods and that they needed natural elements to help cure a patient of whatever they had. Doctors used different herbs and substances to help cure patients. For example, doctors would use garlic and honey. To give the patient the herb or substance they would make it into something that either the patient could drink such as tea or could be rubbed onto the patient as an ointment. Surgery was not performed often because the patient would usually die from the pain and shock of the surgery, the amount of blood they lost or from septicemia, also known as blood poisoning. Doctors did use some medical instruments though, such as something which they called a ‘heated cup’. They used this cup when a patient had a cut. The doctors would put the ‘heated cup’ over the wound and let the blood come up to the surface. They would also wash the cuts using wine or vinegar. Then they would bandage the cut with a linen cloth which had been soaked in wine.  
To treat a patient the first step was to sacrifice an animal in front of the statue of Asclepius (a doctor of that time). The next step was to wash off in the water of tholos. This was considered the washing off of guilt and evil from murdering the animal which you sacrificed. The water in which they washed themselves of in contained salts and minerals. The actual washing off lasted several days. Once at the temple the patient had to pray. After the praying the priest escorted the patient to the ‘abaton’ to sleep on beds made from the sacrificed animals. While the patient was sleeping snakes slid across their bodies. This was thought to heal the patient. When the patient woke up they were either better or they were not. If the patient was not better though, the doctor would tell them they had to leave and come back when their faith in god was stronger.  
  
  
 Hippocrates  
Hippocrates (known as the “Father of Medicine”) was a very famous doctor of Ancient Greece and his method are still practiced today. He was born during 460 BC on the island of Cos in Greece and died during 377 BC. He believed that the body should be looked at as a whole and not as individual parts. He did not believe that illnesses and diseases were caused by spirits and gods but that everything had a scientific explanation. Hippocrates believed that the way the doctor treated his patient was very important. In his oath which he created for doctors and himself to follow, the first thing is that the doctor should be pleasant, happy, cheerful, and have a nice scent. He believed that if the doctor followed these rules it would make the patient feel better. The oath he created was this:   
“I swear by Apollo, Asclepius and by all gods, that I will keep this oath. I will use treatment to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgment but never with a view to injury or wrong doing. I will not give poison to anybody. I will be pure and holy in my life and practice. I will keep secret anything I see or hear professionally which ought not be told.”   
He taught this oath to the students at the medical school which he founded on his home island of Cos.   
Hippocrates came up with the Four Humours. This theory was that the liquids in the body (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile) had to be balanced for a person to be healthy. Hippocrates also believed that the liquids were the reason for certain human behaviors. During Ancient Greek times people believed that the Four Humours were also linked to the four seasons. For example, someone would go to the doctor with a runny nose. The doctor would realize that a lot of people were coming in with runny noses during the winter time. This meant the humour phlegm was not in balance with the rest of the liquids in the body.

Conclusion:  
  
To conclude  Ancient Greece has a big influence on our world of medicine today. Without some of the theories and discoveries that people in Ancient Greece made we would not have the advanced medical discoveries we have today. Whether it was there excellent understanding of the human body to their public health system and back to their methods of diagnosis, the Greeks knew what they needed to do to create such a successful empire that they had. Later generations would not have thrived as much as they did without the help of the Greeks.

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GCSE History Book: Medicine Through Time by Aaron Wilkes

Links:

1. Below is a game you can play about the Four Humors:  
<http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk/games/fling/medicine_humours/index.shtml>  
2. Below is a website that gives information on what doctors believed and what they did to heal you  
<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/greeks/science/medicine/>  
3. A video on Ancient Greek Beliefs in the Medical World  
<http://www.educationforum.co.uk/ancientgreeks.htm>  
4. A game on ancient greek medicine  
<http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk/games/beatdabomb/bomb_greekmedicine.htm>  
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6. A video on what factors affected ancient greek medicine  
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